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SUBJECT: MONTENEGRIN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION: MANDIC STRESSES UNITY
WHILE MOBILIZING SERB BASE

REF: PODGORICA 105 AND PREVIOUS

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11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Andrija Mandic of the Serbian People's Party (SNS) has inched into second place in the polls -- albeit far behind incumbent President Vujanovic (who is knocking on the door of a first-round victory) -- in the run-up to the April 6 presidential election. Defying his reputation as a rabble-rousing, anti-independence Serb nationalist, Mandic is running a positive, issue-based campaign. However, he continues to surround himself with Serb symbols and Serb ideologues, and has capitalized on the Kosovo issue to mobilize his electoral base. END SUMMARY.

Mandic Gains Ground

12. (U) According to the latest survey (conducted March 14-20 by the CEDEM thinktank), Mandic has moved past Nebojsa Medojevic of the Movement for Change (PzP) into second place in the polls -- with 19.1 percent support compared to the PzP candidate's 18.3 percent -- albeit still far behind incumbent President Vujanovic, who is supported by 52.8 percent of voters. Mandic received 14.8 percent support in CEDEM's February poll, while Medojevic had 21.2 percent. (A fourth candidate, Srdjan Milic of the Socialist People's Party (SNP), polled 9.8 percent in March and 9.9 percent in February).

Uniting, Not Dividing?

13. (SBU) Defying his reputation as a one-trick politician pandering to and supported by disgruntled, anti-independence Serbs, Mandic has run a surprisingly positive, issue-based campaign. In slick TV advertisements, he touts his support for family values, security for pensioners, top quality education, health care improvements, higher wages, and the fight against crime and corruption. In the advertisements, there is nary a mention of the Serb identity issues that have been his political bread-and-butter.

14. (SBU) Mandic, who called for civil disobedience following the passage of the Constitution in October 2007, now says his "optimistic" candidacy -- he is running "for all of us" -- provides Montenegro with "a chance for unification." In public speeches he has also touting his "European values." SNS deputy leader Goran Danilovic told us recently that Mandic was supporting greater economic opportunities for youths, pensioners, and public sector employees, as well as equal rights for all minorities. When we suggested that Mandic was promoting Serbs' rights, we were lectured on how Mandic was not singling out Serbs, and how his platform also benefited Bosniaks and Albanians.

15. (SBU) At a March 25 campaign rally we witnessed, Mandic stuck exclusively to economic and social issues. Addressing a small but enthusiastic working-class crowd in a Podgorica suburb, he promised to fix Montenegro's pension system and eliminate drugs in schools, touted the benefits of computers for students, foreign language training, and "European education," and blasted the government for failing to clean up crime and corruption, which he said had slowed foreign investment. He also mentioned he recently had lobbied the Russian Duma to extend the proposed South Stream gas pipeline through Montenegro. (Note: One of the opening speakers at the rally introduced Mandic as a candidate who "can have breakfast in Washington," -- a reference to Mandic's presence at the recent Prayer Breakfast -- "lunch in Belgrade, and dinner in Moscow".)

Still The Serb Candidate

16. (SBU) But while Mandic may not be highlighting identity issues in his national TV ads (or in the Podgorica appearance we

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witnessed), he repeatedly has promised to amend the Constitution to promote the Serbian language, Serbian Orthodox Church, and Serbian flag. He also does not need to stress Serb issues in his speeches, because others do that for him. After Mandic entered the hall in Podgorica, all rose for the Serbian national anthem as supporters waved the Serbian flag and flashed the Serb three-fingered salute. A speaker from the Serb Radical Party (a member of Mandic's Serbian List coalition) told the crowd that Mandic was the only candidate "who can reunite our brothers in Montenegro and Serbia," and the speaker who lauded Mandic's contacts in Washington, Belgrade, and Moscow also said Mandic could travel to Dubrovnik, but that "he would never kneel and apologize" for Montenegrin shelling of that city at the start of the Yugoslav civil wars.

Kosovo Helps Mobilize Base

17. (SBU) Also, more than any other candidate, Mandic has linked himself to opposition to Kosovo's independence. Mandic organized the large anti-independence rally in Podgorica on February 22, and traveled to Kosovska Mitrovica on February 17 and again on March 17 (a recent, full-page campaign ad in Vijesti featured a letter from a student association in that city supporting his candidacy). In fact, he has promised to withhold recognition even if Serbia recognizes Kosovo.

18. (SBU) Mandic also has linked Kosovo to opposition to NATO. For example, on March 9 he told journalists that, while he would honor the results of a referendum on membership, "in my opinion, Montenegro does not belong in NATO," and the NATO bombing in 1999 "was not aimed at protecting human rights in Kosovo but at depriving Serbia of part of its territory." (Note: Mandic further stated that, "I do not want my son Ilija to go to Afghanistan, Somalia, or Iraq to make war and hurt innocent people just like our people suffered less than ten years ago.")

Comment

19. (SBU) Mandic vociferously opposed Montenegrin independence and just a few months ago called on Serbs to show civil disobedience to protest the passage of Montenegro's new constitution. Despite the interesting electoral rhetoric, it would be premature to surmise that Mandic is trying to remake his Serb-based political force into a civic party (as Milic is attempting to do with the SNP) or that the up-tick in support for his candidacy over the last month comes from non-Serb voters. His supporters (and indeed all citizens of this small country) know well what he stands for, and it is likely that the Kosovo issue has helped him mobilize his base electorate. Mandic himself has told us that his goal is to emerge from these elections as the uncontested leader of the opposition.
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